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U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, is airing concerns about declining water levels in the Great Lakes, including Lake Michigan.

Kirk met with representatives from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) and local environmental leaders to discuss new research detailing threats to water levels in the Great Lakes.

"Last year, we won a major victory by ratifying the Great Lakes Water Compact," Kirk said. "With the president's signature and the backing of Congress, we significantly restricted future diversions of lake water. But before we take a victory lap, we need to recognize that climate change and growing regional water demand could dramatically lower the level of the Great Lakes."

Kirk said he will seek to attach an amendment to the FY2010 Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations Bill calling for long-term ice cover and water level outlooks for the Great Lakes to report on the impact of climate change on the habitats, fish and wildlife, commerce, recreational opportunities and water supply of the Great Lakes basin.

Kirk said there are warning signs pointing to environmental danger.

"Rising air temperatures are decreasing ice cover, with Lake Michigan evaporation now happening all year," Kirk said. "With a growing population, estimates show a rising demand for Lake Michigan water. These two factors -- no ice cover and rising water demand for Great Lakes water -- threaten to dramatically lower the normal levels of the lakes."

A 2009 Army Corps of Engineers report indicates Lake Michigan is approximately a foot below its long-term average water level. While water levels are cyclical, rising in the spring and summer and decreasing in the fall and winter, Army Corps forecasts show Lake Michigan water levels falling below long-term averages.

Kirk said one possible cause of water level fluctuations is the decline of ice cover over the Great Lakes. Lake ice in the winter helps slow evaporation.

According to new data from 1972-2008, Lake Michigan ice cover declined by about 30 percent, or a drop of 7,000 square kilometers in 1972-73 to approximately 5,000 square kilometers in 2007-08. From 1972 to 2005, total Great Lakes ice cover dropped by about 40 percent, Kirk said.

Additionally, despite the passage of the Great Lakes--St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact last year, growing pressures on regional water use will stress supply. Last July, CMAP published a report on water demand for the 11 counties of northeastern Illinois. Kirk noted that one estimate indicated a water demand increase of 64.1 percent to 2.4 billion gallons per day by 2050, an increase of 949 million gallons from 2005 levels.

The Great Lakes provide drinking water for more than 30 million people and also are a major economic engine for the region, Kirk said, adding that heightened water demand could further threaten future drinking water supplies as well as water for industry.